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Gates expected to weather stormy CIA confirmation

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WASHINGTON — Robert M. Gates, nominated to replace William J. Casey as director of central intelligence, will undergo a tough grilling at his confirmation hearing today but, barring some disturbing new revelation, will later be confirmed by the Senate, knowledgeable congressional sources say.

In part, today's hearing will be a forum for questions senators are unable to direct at Mr. Casey, who remains hospitalized following surgery in December to remove a cancerous brain tumor.

It also is likely to be an occasion for senators to demand renewed CIA respect for congressional oversight as a way to restore the mutual trust that many members feel was damaged by Mr. Casey's lack of candor.

Committee members are likely to probe the CIA's role in the Iran arms sale, its assistance in supplying aid to the Nicaraguan contras, and what and when Mr. Gates knew about both operations, the sources said.

Other questions are expected to focus on his relationship with Mr. Casey, attempting to elicit whether he was in a position to know most of what Mr. Casey knew about the Iran-contra affair.

He may be questioned further about what role he played in preparing what Mr. Casey would tell the committee last Nov. 21. Although the CIA had received some information weeks before about a possible diversion of Iran arms-sale proceeds to the contras, Mr. Casey made no mention of it during his appearance.

According to the committee's report, Mr. Gates later testified that the reason for this was that the CIA had received only "bits and pieces of information and analytical judgments by one intelligence officer, and that this was not considered very much to go on."

Last week, Mr. Gates responded to a series of questions prepared by committee staff members, one of whom described them as "lawyer-type questions — what did you know and when did you know it?" His responses may form the basis for some questioning today.

The committee will also weigh whether to release an unclassified version of Mr. Gates' Dec. 4 testimony on the Iran-contra affair.

Both the committee chairman, Sen. David L. Boren, D-Okla., and vice chairman, Sen. William S. Cohen, R-Maine, support Mr. Gates' confirmation at this point, staffers said yesterday. But aides cautioned that this support is based on what is now known about the Iran-contra affair and Mr. Gates' limited involvement. The committee has acknowledged that its own probe was incomplete.

So today's grilling will be aimed partly at eliciting answers to a range of questions about the CIA's role that will provide a record against which any future revelations can be compared, one aide said.

"If later on it turns out that he lied, or omitted some glaring incident, then you're in a position to say, 'We want your badge,' " a committee aide said yesterday.

Even if the hearing is completed today, the panel won't vote until sometime next week at the earliest, and a full Senate vote would come after that.

It is possible that the Senate vote will not come until after the release of the next major report on the affair — one prepared by a presidential commission headed by former Sen. John G. Tower, R-Texas. The commission has access to computerized documents not received by the Intelligence Committee and has also interviewed President Reagan twice.

Former committee Vice Chairman Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., who recently left the panel, said yesterday, "I've talked with a number of members. Most people like and respect Bob Gates, but people have been so concerned about the Casey attitude toward oversight that they will probably pin him down with more specificity than in the past."

Mr. Leahy predicted that Mr. Gates would be confirmed.

"He is highly competent," he said. "The CIA needs to have a director — we all know that."

A 20-year CIA veteran who holds a doctorate in Russian and Soviet history, Mr. Gates, 43, comes from the agency's analytical, as opposed to operational, side. From 1982 until he was named deputy director last year, he headed the CIA arm responsible for intelligence analysis. He has also worked in the National Security Council.

He is seen as someone "inclined to deal with the agency professionally and not substitute a covert action policy for a foreign policy," Mr. Leahy said.

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